

Ukraine: Information Operations In Countries of the Former Soviet Union

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Editorial Abstract: Dr. Pocheptsov offers a very different definition of IO than the other contributors. He notes information operations are the achievement of non-information goals (social, economic, military, political) using information technologies. He offers some mass communication means for changing public opinion, and recommends altering channels of mass communications and mass meaning if one desires to change a target group's conscience. For fighting extremists, he recommends finding ways to disagree with reality in more "soft" ways; and work toward new ways of "interpreting events," instead of only working toward targeting the "user-website" relationship.

The Development of Information Operations in Ukraine

Ukraine, as well as other former Soviet Republics, has limited experience in using public communications to influence the mass consciousness. The process for creating one's own identity is slowed primarily due to a lack of experience as an independent mass culture. At the same time, however, Russia was able to "turn on" its mass culture, which created the necessary prerequisites to produce, for example, TV shows and soap operas on a variety of themes from romantic to patriotic.

Such a primary flow of information allows for the crystallization of the required configurations of virtual objects. Mass consciousness can only be altered using the channels of mass communications and mass meaning (for example, a bestselling novel or soap opera). The latter allows for creation of a parallel virtual world, where the configuration of the content is presented "as is," in the case of religion for example.

Information operations can be defined as the achievement of non-information goals (social, economic, military, political) using information technologies. Among information technologies we are currently seeing an increasing role for non-mass produced messages, such as rumors and direct contacts. This shift is driven by the inherent higher level of trust in direct contact communication as compared to mass communication.

As such we can emphasize two important characteristics of information technologies:

- They are directed towards the successful transition from information to another level (social, economic, military, political)

- They mimic natural communication flows. The opposite case would be the use of political advertising, or any type of advertisement, where the artificial nature of such communication flow is clear.

Information operations can also be divided into defensive and offensive,



*Republic of the Ukraine Coat of Arms.
(Wikimedia)*

although recent research underlines the connectedness of these processes. If we talk about offense versus defense in the former Soviet block countries (with the exception of Russia), they have only defensive information operations experience. For example, government institutions of the Ukraine gained experience in defensive IO in the following situations:

- A scandal involving tapes of the former guard of the President, that had an effect on both the local and international levels;

- Western accusations of the trade of the Ukrainian "Kolchugi" radar system

to Iraq, which produced pressure on both the information and political levels;

- The natural gas conflict between Ukraine and Russia; a conflict over meat and milk products trade; as well as other similar trade-related conflicts;

- Local conflicts of smaller intensity and duration (between Ukraine and Romania, Ukraine and Poland, Ukraine and Bulgaria);

- The Orange Revolution of 2004;

- The emergence of totalitarian religious cults, such as "White Brotherhood."

The press-secretary of the Ukrainian President at the time of the 'tape scandal' noted: "I was long affected by the tape scandal. It was the hardest time for President Kuchma, no other President was in a worse situation. I remember we had consultants who worked with President Clinton during his troubles. God, I thought, I wish I was faced with their problems instead of this!"

The gas conflict between Ukraine and Russia, which emerged around the particulars of the gas trade treaty, was interesting as both Russian and Ukrainian media attempted to create parallel interpretations of the same events for the Ukrainian audience. A consensus among experts was that Ukraine lost that battle.

We can also view the Orange Revolution of 2004 as a war of interpretation—one also lost by the government—despite the fact a large proportion of the media outlets were under government control. At the time, the opposition created a more compelling narrative, which engaged key audiences. The government was seen as slowing down the country's progress, and it

could not get rid of such an image. It is well known in the history of religion that faiths under pressure become more creative. Similarly, the opposition during the Orange Revolution was more creative than the government.

During the war of re-interpretations, especially during “colorful” revolutions, the same events achieve different meanings. Such wars display the following patterns:

- The more successful the narrative, the more favorable the interpretation of new events in accordance with this narrative;
- Good narrative submerges ambivalent facts;
- “Mobilizing narrative” is written from the citizens’ perspective, which makes it that much harder for the government to create a similar narrative.

Ukraine also witnessed new developmental means among totalitarian religious cults, such as “White Brotherhood,” which successfully took over a church building and made a call for the mass suicide of its members. No other former Soviet country experienced this. Investigations into the cult left unanswered questions:

- An organization of such magnitude could not have survived only through donations from its followers;
- The leader of the sect did not use hypnosis to influence followers, yet a large number of followers had some sort of psychological deficiency;
- It was difficult to define the nature of these psychological deficiencies, as well as the large number of followers and their geographical spread;
- One of the leaders of the cult was rumored to work for a special agency (KGB) [former Soviet intelligence].

The Ukraine was also used as a test-tube for several large-scale information operations that affected the whole population of the country. Local specialists in the Ukraine participated in political technologies and spin-doctoring. During the last decade, the practice of discrediting was always ahead of the practice of refuting negative information, which allowed some organizations to



Ukrainian officer demonstrates IT monitoring to NATO colleagues. (Defense Link)

“build up muscle” in this area. This offensively-oriented information sphere is characterized by:

- What is seen as information fact by one side, is seen as disinformation by another;
- Information conflicts are an extension of economical ones;
- A more powerful economical or political player is also a more powerful information player, as he has the necessary resources.

All Ukraine citizens have experienced a drastic environmental change—one that led to a life in a different civilization (from a Soviet to a post-Soviet one).. Both “Perestroika” and the Orange Revolution have similar characteristics, mainly a rapid change in ‘who is the enemy.’ The enemy played an important role in the Soviet model, as it defined everything. “Perestroika” followed this model:

- First Stage: **The Change**: an outside enemy is substituted by an inside one: a governmental system;
- Second Stage: **Use Of An Internal Resource**: all types of propaganda mechanisms are used in the internal attack;
- Third Stage: **Delegitimization**: the population refuses the power’s right to rule.

The Orange Revolution was also crafted by creating an enemy inside the government, not post factum as in previous examples, but during the process of its formation.

Overall the population of the former Soviet block countries have more experience with information operations than any other country in the world. During the Soviet era people learned to read between the lines of mass produced messages, thus intuitively stumbling upon the opposite meaning.

In order to speak about IO theory, we have to separate the players with theoretical and practical experience. They rarely intersect, which complicates the transition of the experience between the two. The practitioners fill the lack of theoretical knowledge with creative approaches, teamwork to generate ideas, and actual execution.

Ukrainian experience in the theory of information technologies is significantly slowed, since theorists do not participate in practice and practitioners do not write theory. Where common sense predominates, both substitute this for their lack of theory or practice.

The Ukrainian military position, at least that published in the mass media, has two characteristics: first, the level of novelty of ideas lies only in the very detailed aspects of the offense; second, there is a transition to a psychological sphere, which is where the terminology “information—psychological influence” originates.

Academic research (such as doctoral dissertations) is an active area of the information sphere, as are information policy, and Ukraine’s international image. O. V. Litvinenko proposed what

can be called a ‘culture-oriented model of IO,’ in which the narrative introduced is taken from some local mythological structure. Additionally, Ya. Varyvoda analyzed Russian financial groups’ information activities in the Caucasus region, focusing on those connected with economical and political interests. This author is creating what can be called a ‘semiotic model of IO,’ in which mass culture plays a crucial role.

As to Ukraine’s international image, a powerful political player such as Russia looks at Ukraine as an object, and not as a player in information wars. The Ukraine is seen either at the intersection of the interests of Russia and US, or the US and Europe.

There are several agencies in Ukraine specializing in information warfare within the economic sphere. In 2006 these agencies held corresponding training to attract attention to their work, under the title “Ukraine: The Art of Future Information Warfare.”

Conflicts in post-Soviet block territory frequently have underlying economic tension, although they are also frequently tied to political tensions. Apart from Russia, most countries have very limited access to TV broadcasting outside their own territory. Thus they frequently become the source of Russian attacks, as in recent actions against Lithuania, Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia, and Latvia. Just looking at this list, it is clear that the political component is present in these actions. However, it is possible that an economic war (using information warfare as a tool) also took place, due to two factors:

- There are fewer political restrictions over actions;
- There is a need to cut off economical ties due to political or military concerns.

More generally, information conflict usually develops through the following stages:

- Stage one: A point of conflict suddenly appears;
- Stage two: Public attention is brought and kept at the point of conflict;

- Stage three: The conflict fades (public attention is turned away from the conflict).

The conflict fading stage is usually long-lasting: in the case of Russian-Georgian relations, it lasted a full year. This was driven by the vivid events in the first two stages, not easily forgotten by the public. Even when the government wants the conflict to be over, it continues to linger.

For controlled conflicts—and all the conflicts on the post-Soviet territory are like this—the fading stage signals the end of the conflict. After event X happens, which was the sole purpose of the conflict, the controllers no longer invest resources, thus the conflict fades out.



Republic of Ukraine. (Univ. of Texas)

Russia has vast experience in conducting information operations targetting outside parties. Let’s recall, for example, the “Romancing the Stone” situation, when the British Special Forces were caught in Moscow with a ‘stone’ used to read information from agents at a distance. As a result, Moscow’s government passed a law restricting nongovernmental organizations, since one of the members of the British group was also responsible for distributing nongovernmental grants inside Russia. In 2007 a similar information conflict was observed around the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in London.

All major international players have dealt with some issue aimed at uniting the public: for the US it was recovering from the Great Depression; and for the USSR it was the propaganda during the foundation of the Soviet Union. The major players built the new picture of the world through traditional media environments: movies in earlier times, and TV now. Ukraine, with its problem of a political split along geographical lines, requires projects of the same magnitude to unite the country.

Information Warfare Strategies on the Internet: Fighting the Extremists

We can define the following characteristics of the Internet that do not easily coexist with items associated with visual culture:

- A more dispersed environment, where the objects are hardly connected to each other;
- A multitude of events that becomes less important due to their sheer number. As a result it is hard to respond to them with individual interpretations, which requires more general interpretation systems;
- Increased dependence on the source of the interpretations;
- The knowledge of the details comes before the understanding of the whole structure;
- An Internet environment is formed by interaction with its consumers.

The Internet environment is frequently analogous to a social network, since the consumer visits its “own” websites. The consumer trusts the information presented there more than other sources. The website and the consumer have a friendly relationship, as compared to the simpler ‘consumption’ relationship of newspapers or TV. Modeling such a “friendly” environment should incorporate the fact that models work with objects which do not interact physically with consumers. All objects lie in the information environment.

Several historical examples show a similar disconnect between the physical environment and the receiver’s understanding of the environment:

• The WWII propaganda campaign with Japan, where in addition to nine messages a soldier could verify through direct physical contact, there was one message with informational evidence.

• A maxim was formulated during the election of former US President Richard Nixon: since there was no direct contact with the candidate, one should not change the candidate, but rather his image.

Another way to change the environment is to change the voter rather than the candidate. Therefore, there are several ways to change the elements of the communication chain:

• Keep the speaker and the listener constant, but change the message. This is the most standard way of creating communication;

• Change the speaker (or the content) keeping the listener constant;

• Change the listener, but keep the speaker constant;

• Change the context. For example, to diminish the negative interpretation of disasters, the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations started a weekly TV program about disasters in the rest of the world.

The modification of certain “off limits” subjects can be painful for the audience, and usually should be avoided. For example, a figure of the Japanese Emperor was one such object; he remained unchanged even after Japan’s capitulation. Hence, certain political as well as religiously sensitive objects remain constant for the audience, thus making it harder to modify them.

However, there exists a distribution of genuineness within the social network: the more direct contact we have with our sources, the more we trust them. Yet as we move upward in any hierarchy, there are more possibilities to loose trust, as direct contact is less likely.

Speaking from [author] Marshall McLuhan’s view, the Internet environment is more similar to the acoustic than the visual environment. Let’s examine the following characteristics of such an environment:

• An audio environment does not have a definite distinction between the author and the listener, since everyone

can be both; Internet blogs provide this opportunity. A visual environment creates authorship and corresponding hierarchy;

• An audio environment moves away from individual to collective. Collective opinion, collective structures dominate here;

• Authority and authenticity are built through institutions, and not through people. Therefore there is a high level of stability, similar to those in Muslim society which are maintained through a religiously-oriented educational system.

We can use precisely these characteristics as counterstrategies:

• If everyone is equal in the acoustic environment, this makes it easier for your people or ideas to advance;

• The audio environment is more likely to be affected by a swarming attack, a la [author John] Arquilla, and not a standard centralized attack;

• The model of a “magnet” attracting attention, which can be realized through marginal changes that introduce doubt into the main version of events, without openly denying them;

• Major changes in this environment can only occur through extraordinary events (for example, news of Arafat’s death from AIDS can change the attitude towards his movement as a whole). Audio environments can act irrationally by shifting attention to the most vivid event, rather than the most important one.

General tendencies in the development of any environment follow the same principle: human systems try to expand, and thus subordinate any unclaimed environment. Physical, informational, and virtual environments all are constantly under attack by other physical, informational, and virtual environments trying to force the former to live under its rules.

The following goals highlight any attempt to modify the points of a conflict:

• A change of heroes, enemies, and victims;

• A change of the objects of attention;

• A change in the underlying motivation of actions;

• A shift of attention to the historical period and the symbols of that time.

The goal is to create a new virtual reality that would fit the interests of the communicator. This new virtual reality must not change completely: as a first step it can only question the validity of the previous reality. For example, we can keep the heroic event, but find a different motivation for it, such as struggle for power, cowardice, or other similar negative aspect. So the structure: “positive act—positive motivation” is transformed into a “positive act—negative motivation.” Let’s call this example *Negation Through The Change Of Motivation*.

During the destruction of the image of [Vladimir] Lenin, his story went through a ‘broadening’ of his personal characteristics, and as a result it was no longer a taboo or “off limits” subject. It was okay to move away from a canonical image. The stage of Lenin with a “human face” was followed by the stage of Lenin with an “inhuman face.” Thus even though this broadening of image was done with noble goals in mind, it was followed at the next step by a more negative characterization. Let’s call this device a *Negation Through The Broadening Of The Canon*.

Another device is to change the nature of the communications: a shift from storytelling from one point of view to another. Let’s take for example possible ways of telling the story of “Little Red Riding Hood.” The traditional version is told from the point of view of a little girl. But it is also possible to tell this story from the perspective of the mother, grandmother, or even the wolf. Let’s call this device *Negation Through The Change Of The Storyteller*. We can use this device frequently, as many events can be described from the point of view of different witnesses, allowing new information to be introduced.

The Internet environment has less inertia; therefore it is frequently used in situations when the environment of traditional media is blocked, for example, by authorities. A campaign in the Internet environment can employ different types of messages unusable in an official environment. It could be a

campaign similar to dissemination of rumors, which takes on a second-life through repetition.

The environment which serves as a source for extremist/terrorism-friendly feelings is very ritualized and closed. The main goal of an Internet counter-propaganda war, which has very well defined rules about both allowable and banned actions and messages, should be to increase the number of possible future life directions of an individual. Specific results of such work are:

- A deceleration of the processes of moving towards a goal predetermined by the creators of the environment;
- An introduction of the possible “crossroads” that can shift the attention or action away towards more secondary tasks;
- An introduction of new models of individual development.

The destruction of the pre-programmed nature of terrorist behavior can be done by increasing the number of options for development, where one can transition from one state to another. For example:

- Breach of the interpretation of real events;
- Breach of the understanding of virtual objects;
- Breach of the motivations and goals of terrorism by showing that they can be achieved using other means.

The destruction of the interpretive model of the object is done by introducing a new opposite characteristic: adding a negative feature to a positive object or adding a positive feature to a negative object. For example, when the US was bombing Afghanistan (a negative object), the addition of dropping food supplies and not bombing on religious holidays added a positive feature to the object, which slowed down the creation of the solitary negative view.

In another example, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine destroyed the legitimacy of power, by introducing new connections: not just power, but “criminal power.” According to scholar George Lakoff, trying to dispute a particular framing of an issue does not destroy it, but rather strengthens it. We should refocus away from disputing

someone else’s framing of an issue, and towards creating and maintaining a new one. A more global goal in this case is to conceptually change and modify the virtual environment by:

- Change of heroes;
- Change of enemies;
- Change of sacred texts which make a coordinated system of heroes, enemies, and victims.

Such principal change is hard to achieve. Therefore we talk more about a correction of the meaning of heroes, enemies, and sacred text. This triad is interconnected: by changing enemies, we change the heroes, and vice versa.

New meanings serve as goals in information warfare. These should not repeat existing and conflicting themes, which would ease their acceptance into the mass consciousness. The generation of new meanings can be seen as a separate research task. Using another historical example, when the Apostle Paul introduced communion with bread and wine, where the latter is seen as blood, introduced something that goes against Judaism, which does not allow the use of blood. But, this practice was close to pagan religions, where the use of blood was accepted. The main obstacle to development of new meanings is that they are hard to come by in a world flooded with old meanings. If the technical aspect of human civilization has developed rapidly, the social aspect is, paradoxically, advancing slowly.

The Internet-environment can fulfill three tasks:

- Compensating for the lack of something in reality (for example, film and comic book superheroes appeared as a reaction to the Great Depression);
- Reinforcing reality (for example, extremism reinforces the existing confrontation between the East and the West);
- Transforming reality (for example, the US war for Muslim hearts and minds is designed to negate the negativity directed towards the West).

Perestroika, the Orange Revolution, and the war for the hearts and minds of Muslims are fought in a highly controlled (by ideology or religion) environment. In this case it is only possible to create a new

virtual reality using more “soft” tools, without engaging in direct conflict.

Yet another counter strategy is creation of an alternative virtual reality:

- Stage One: Expansion - broadening canonical frames of the description, which allows addition of negative features into the positive objects, and positive to negative;

- Stage Two: Negativity - addition of negative features into the positive objects, and positive to negative;

- Stage Three: Change of enemies into friends - this is a final stage of changing the virtual reality model.

Political leaders go through the same stages when they go from admiration to condemnation. Mikhail Gorbachev, for example, went through this process as did most major figures from his administration. Ukraine’s Orange Revolution went through a stage of controlled chaos, which made it easier to change the model of the world of the mass consciousness. For that purpose Perestroika used empty store shelves, mass protests, and the fight against alcoholism, which resulted only in longer lines in the stores. The Orange Revolution openly expressed insubordination to the government, used the main square of Kiev as a stage for protests, and used the previously-noted presidential tape recording scandal to replace the serving president.

In many ways the West did not win the Cold War on the level of ideologies, where there were no deviations, but rather on the level of reality—everyday existence. Ballpoint pens, bluejeans, etc. turned out to be more powerful “weapons” than real ones. This happens because each element of everyday life carries inside it the element of virtual reality—new meanings that can disagree with accepted reality in more “soft” ways. Russia faced the problem of confronting foreign influence much earlier than the time of [Emperor] Peter I. This was a problem during the governance of his father, Tsar Alexej Mikhailovich. A. S. Orlov sees the emergence of this conflict even earlier during the times of Ivan the Terrible.

The opinions of that earlier time are very similar to what Muslim society now experiences. Both then and now, religion remains the main component of this society, subordinating everything else. From here, we can see a way to influence Muslim society: through building secular organizations, which have the potential for change. The same experience easily translates to the Internet environment: our goal is to build a new representation of reality in the new virtual world.

It is possible to borrow experience from other related disciplines. For example, social marketing suggests different types of interventions depend on the target audiences' motivations, abilities, and possibilities to act. We must incorporate all of these factors into an Internet-based information war.

For example, some suggest nongovernmental organizations become highly visible when their activities resonate with international nongovernmental organizations. The counteraction strategy in this case can be fighting against the interpretation of a fight for power or property in the light of the fight for human rights and democracy, when such interpretation is

provided by the local NGOs. In this way, such interpretation loses resonance.

However, information reality turns out to be more complex than one can assume from such analyses. In the case of the Internet, we can observe the following characteristics:

- Multitude of websites: blocking them is no longer effective;
- Websites change rapidly: it is hard to apply the same methods of influence on them;
- Decentralization: it is harder to attack the hierarchy;
- Reliance on local websites: this is the source of information in Arab countries.

It is also necessary to be closely connected to Arab culture as the only way to establish trust. Counterpropaganda requires even more complex constructs than propaganda, yet at the same time the consequences of such actions are harder to plan. Counterstrategy can be realized through counter-narratives, which can stand against the narratives of the terrorists.

The most effective counter-narratives are the internal sources of influence. For example, the UK's Information Research

Department (part of the Foreign Office and MI6), has worked from inside the foreign field. As a result its articles and books did not refer to the true sources or true authorship. Therefore, the level of trust to such information was rather high.

Conclusion

The Internet is so flexible it allows us to use of a wider set of possibilities than traditional media. But the consumer wants to receive the information flow he is looking for. The conflict or fight should not be targeted towards the "user-website" relationship, as such would not be productive, but towards "event-ways of interpreting" relationship. It is important that this, or any such type of interpretation, should be acceptable to the consumer.

The Internet can foster the generation of new needs, which can also be an effective technique of information warfare. If the old needs stem from religious or political roots, the news ones do not have this connection and become a way of creating new meanings. New needs can be met: by new people, with new types of virtual objects. 